

GERBER SHEET METAL WORKS BUILDING
West Side Milling District
128 Portland Avenue South
Minneapolis
Hennepin County
Minnesota

HAER No. MN-15

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

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GERBER SHEET METAL WORKS BUILDING

Location: West Side Milling District,
128 Portland Avenue South, Minneapolis, Hennepin
County, Minnesota

UTM: 15:479590:4980510

Quad: Minneapolis South, Minnesota (1967, revised 1972)

Date of Construction: ca. 1892-1904

Present Owner: Hayber Development Group (at time of demolition)

Present Use: The building was demolished in 1985.

Significance: The Gerber Sheet Metal Works Building is
historically significant for its association with
Minneapolis' "West Side Milling District." The
West Side District was the center of the
Minneapolis flour industry, and the Gerber Sheet
Metal Works specialized in manufacturing items for
flour mills and grain elevators. In 1971, the
Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office of
the Minnesota Historical Society nominated the
building to the National Register of Historic
Places as part of the St. Anthony Falls Historic
District.

Historians: Jeffrey A. Hess and Demian Hess, January 1990

The Gerber Sheet Metal Works Building is historically significant for its association with Minneapolis' "West Side Milling District."¹ Constructed sometime between 1892 and 1904, the shop specialized in the manufacture of spouts and other sheet metal items for flour mills and grain elevators. Reflecting the general decline of the West Side District during the 1930s, the sheet metal works moved to a new location in 1935. After that date, the building experienced several changes in ownership and use.

The West Side Milling District lies on the west bank of the Mississippi River, in close proximity to the Falls of St. Anthony.² It is bounded by the river, Fourth Avenue South, South Second Street, and Eighth Avenue South. In 1856, this parcel of land was acquired by the Minneapolis Mill Company, which planned to develop the waterpower potential. In 1856-1858, the Minneapolis Mill Company cooperated with the St. Anthony Falls Water Power Company, which owned the land on the opposite bank of the river, to construct a dam above the falls.

Attracted by the available waterpower, a wide variety of manufacturies developed in the West Side District during the 1860s. By 1871, the area contained 25 waterpowered establishments. These consisted of ten flour mills, seven sawmills, two woolen mills, a cotton mill, a paper mill, an iron works, a sash mill, a planing mill, and a railroad machine shop. The district also contained several steam-powered plants, including metal shops, woodworking establishments, and a small custom gristmill.

Despite the industrial diversity of the 1860s, flour milling became the West Side's dominant industry in the 1870s. This specialization was

partially the result of technological change. After extensive experimentation, by the end of the 1860s, Minneapolis millers had developed a new method of grinding spring wheat which produced a much higher quality flour. Demand for the new flour rose immediately, and almost overnight new mills sprouted in the West Side District. Between 1870 and 1880, seventeen new flouring plants were established within the district, all but one operating on waterpower.

Concurrent with this increase in flour production was a decrease in other types of industrial activity. This decline resulted partly from general economic conditions and partly from the conscious policy of the Minneapolis Mill Company. Convinced that sawmilling operations wasted waterpower, the Minneapolis Mill Company, between 1876 and 1880, purchased most of the sawmills on the West Side and, within a decade, phased them out of production. Other businesses left the district of their own accord, seeking new places within Minneapolis to expand. Still other firms simply succumbed to the competitive pressures of an increasingly national market. By the end of the 1870s, the Minneapolis flour interests had established their dominance over the district.

By 1880, Minneapolis, and the West Side, had become the nation's leading flouring center, a distinction it maintained over the next five decades. By 1930, however, significant changes in wheat quality, freight rate structure, and tariff policy had undermined its supremacy. To insure their continued survival, the great West Side flouring corporations shifted the focus of their operations away from Minneapolis and began to build extensive milling complexes in Chicago, Kansas City, and Buffalo. After Minneapolis ceded first place in flour production to Buffalo in

1930, many of the West Side's large milling complexes were abandoned or demolished.

In its heyday, the West Side Milling District contained many businesses not directly associated with flour production, but which nevertheless catered to the dominant industry. The Gerber Sheet Metal Works is a case in point. James J. Gerber established the company in 1888 or 1889.³ It initially occupied a frame building in the heart of the West Side District, on the corner of Sixth Avenue South (now Portland Avenue) and South Second Street.⁴ A native of Wisconsin, Gerber learned the sheet metal trade in Milwaukee. In 1880, he moved to Minneapolis, working as a tinsmith until establishing his own business. The J. J. Gerber Sheet Metal Works apparently flourished, and Gerber became a respected businessman, earning listings in several Minnesota biographies. Gerber died in 1930, just as hard times settled over the district.⁵ Reflecting the gradual abandonment of the West Side, the company relocated its shop to another section of the city in 1935.⁶

The Gerber Sheet Metal Works was an integral part of the West Side Milling District, producing sheet metal items for the area's flour mills and grain elevators. In 1896, The Weekly Northwestern Miller noted that "J.J. Gerber . . . makes all the Beall [wheat] heaters sold by the Beall Improvements Co. The rest of his business consists of work for the mills."⁷ One of Gerber's principal items was a flexible distributing spout, which he patented in 1900.⁸ With the declaration that "my specialties are mill and elevator spouting of all descriptions," Gerber described his flexible spout in an advertisement from 1900:

The Gerber Improved Distributing Spout . . . [is] made of heavy sheet steel. Hopper and elbows are made of cast iron. The

discharge elbow . . . sets into [the] floor or [into] funnels leading to bins[,] making it impossible for the spout to get out of position and mixing grain. By pressing the foot lever . . . the end of [the] spout is lifted out of floor funnel and can be swung to any other bin desired and locked in place.⁹

Gerber improved the spout several times, receiving additional patents in 1902 and 1906. In essence, the spout consisted of a series of telescoping sections connected by means of bolts and chains. By removing or adding sections and adjusting the chain connections, the spout could easily be lengthened or shortened. The spout was apparently a popular item, and the Northwestern Miller published a notice of its patent and operation in 1906.¹⁰

The frame building in which Gerber first established his shop was demolished sometime between 1892 and 1904. Between these dates, the brick structure now known as the Gerber Sheet Metal Works Building was erected on the lot.¹¹ The structure may have been built by John B. Gilfillan, who purchased the lot in 1903. Gerber appears to have been the new building's primary tenant, and he purchased the property from Gilfillan in 1906.¹²

When first constructed, the Gerber Sheet Metal Works Building appears to have been a simple, two-story, rectangular, brick structure with a shallow-pitched shed roof. The building measured approximately 100 feet by 40 feet. It is not known how Gerber equipped his shop or whether he made any significant alterations to the structure. After the firm relocated in 1935, the building went through several changes in ownership. Each new occupant appears to have extensively altered the building's interior, installing new partitions, utilities and equipment. The locations of exterior doors and windows also appear to have changed over time. Among the most notable alterations, fish-smoking ovens were installed in 1945, a

concrete block storage room was added in 1967, and the building was stuccoed in 1968.¹³

In 1971, the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) of the Minnesota Historical Society determined that the Gerber Sheet Metal Works Building was historically significant as a contributing property in the St. Anthony Falls Historic District.¹⁴ In 1984, the Hayber Development Group of Minneapolis proposed to redevelop several old mills in the district for hotel, office and commercial use. As part of the so-called "Block 10 Project," the developer planned to demolish the Gerber Sheet Metal Works Building. Due to the building's significance, the Minneapolis City Council, SHPO, and developer entered into a Memorandum of Agreement stipulating that it be recorded according to "Level II Standards" of the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record. Following the completion of the requisite field survey and large-format photography, the Gerber Sheet Metal Works Building was demolished in 1985. This study is intended to fulfill the documentation requirements for the structure.

Notes

1. The historic name is based on the fact that the Gerber Sheet Metal Works was the primary tenant, and eventual owner, of the building just after it was built.
2. This history of the West Side Milling District closely follows a study of the area prepared by MacDonald and Mack Partnership, and others, for the Minneapolis Riverfront Development Coordination Board, entitled Saint Anthony Falls Rediscovered (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Riverfront Development Coordination Board, 1980). Jeffrey A. Hess, a joint author of this report, was responsible for the historical sections of the earlier study. For additional information, see Robert M. Frame, Millers to the World: Minnesota's Nineteenth Century Water Power Flour Mills (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1977); Lucile M. Kane, The Falls of St. Anthony, 2nd ed. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987).

3. The founding date of the company is variously reported. It is listed as 1888 in Albert Nelson Marquis, The Book of Minnesotans (Chicago: A.N. Marquis Company, 1907), p. 179. It is reported as 1889 in R.L. Polk and Company, Little Sketches of Big Folks: Minnesota 1907 (St. Paul: R.L. Polk and Company, 1907), p. 147. However, Gerber is not listed as having his own business until the 1890/1891 Minneapolis City Directory. At that time, James J. Gerber shared a business with his brother, Robert, and the company is listed as Gerber Brothers Sheet Metalworks. According to the City Directory, this association continued until 1893/1894. After that date, the company apparently was called the J.J. Gerber Sheet Metal Works (see, for example, Gerber's advertisement in the 1895/1896 Minneapolis City Directory, p. 1124). The firm is still in operation in Minneapolis as Gerber Industries Incorporated, manufacturers of grain elevator equipment.
4. According to the 1890/1891 Minneapolis City Directory, Gerber's business was located at 128 Sixth Avenue South. The building at this location is first depicted on an 1892 insurance map; see Atlas of Minneapolis, v. 4 (Chicago: Rascher Insurance Map Publishing Company, 1892), plate 367 (hereafter referred to as "1892 Rascher"). The building appears as an irregularly shaped, wood-framed structure.
5. Biographical information on James J. Gerber is drawn from: R.L. Polk and Company, Little Sketches of Big Folks; Albert Nelson Marquis, The Book of Minnesotans. Gerber's death is recorded in Abstract of Title to Lot 5, Block 16, City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County (hereafter referred to as "Abstract of Title").
6. The City Directory lists the Gerber Sheet Metal Works at 128 Sixth Avenue South through 1935. The next year, the company is listed at 518-520 South Third Street. Additional information was provided by Demian Hess, Telephone Interview with Garry Provo, Gerber Industries, 22 September 1989.
7. Quote is from the Northwestern Miller 42 (24 July 1896), 137. According to Alber Nelson Marquis, The Book of Minnesotans. Gerber was a "manufacturer of Minneapolis 'V' elevator cups and Beall wheat steamer[s], making a specialty of mill and elevator spouting."
8. "Patents No. 693,359 to 693,822," The Official Gazette of the United States Patent Office, 91 (15 May 1900), 1366-1367.
9. Davison's Minneapolis City Directory, v. 28 (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Directory Company, 1900), p. 16.
10. "Patents No. 693,359 to 693,822," The Official Gazette of the United States Patent Office, 98 (18 February 1902), 1470-1471; Northwestern Miller 68 (21 November 1906), 506.
11. Since no permits have been found for the demolition of the frame building and the construction of the brick structure, the dates given are based on insurance maps. The wood-framed building is depicted on the 1892 Rascher. The brick structure is first depicted in Atlas of Minneapolis, v. 4 (Chicago: Rascher Insurance Map Publishing Company, 1892, updated 1904),

plate 367.

12. Abstract of Title.

13. No good descriptions or early views of the building have been located. A partial view of the building's south side is visible in a panoramic 1908 photograph of the West Side held by the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul. From the photograph, it is not clear whether the building originally had a flat- or a shed-roof. The window and door openings on the south side also do not correspond with those evident in 1985. The Abstract of Title provides the following information on the building's ownership after 1935:

- 1939--Building sold to state for taxes
- 1945--Sold to Leonard Nordquist, who sells to Baker Brokerage Company in same year
- 1950--Baker Brokerage sells to Northwest Fish Company, Inc.
- 1959--Northwest Fish Company to Helen A. Dietrich
- 1965--Georganne Dietrich Thorn, Steven Garret Thorn and Helen A. Dietrich to Hayes and Company

Building Permits, located at the Minneapolis Inspections Department, provide the following additional information:

DATE	PERMIT #	COST	DESCRIPTION
1907	A9708	\$1000	J.J. Gerber, owner, permit to repair foundation (Trainor Bros., builder)
1945	A26362	\$6000	Baker Brokerage, owner, permit to make minor repairs and construct fish-smoking oven (Julius Atsch, builder)
1947	A27637	\$500	High-Lo Equipment Company, tenants, permit to cut new loading dock doorway and make minor alterations (Julius Atsch, builder)
1950	A29212	\$600	Northwest Fish Company, owner, permit to build partition walls (Peter Sitting, builder)
1959	A33585	\$1600	Robert Dietrich, owner, permit to build partition walls for offices (Volp Construction Co., builder)
1966	A36186	\$1200	Hayes and Company, owner, permit to make interior alterations for a proposed sheet metal shop (Hayes and Co., builder)
1967	A36939	\$7700	Hayes and Company, owner, permit to build concrete block addition (Robert Nystrom, architect; Naugle-Lech Co., builder)
1968	K88355	\$3550	Hayes and Company, owners, permit to

plaster and lathe exterior (A.M.
Philipson, builder)

14. Minnesota Historical Society, "National Register Nomination Form for St. Anthony Falls Historic District," unpublished, 1971; copy on file at the Minnesota SHPO.